

Contemplative Prayer
By: Dan Thelen

Prayer is an act of love and trust in God. To be authentic this has to be complete with no hidden agendas. When done in this manner, prayer can transform oneself into a more complete and self aware Christian. Thomas Merton, in his book 'Contemplative Prayer', steps the reader through authentic prayer and provides the reader with signs to guide his/her journey to spiritual union with God.

Thomas Merton begins his discussion on prayer by forewarning the reader that there are no 'magic' tricks to develop a deep spiritual life. In fact, he comments that as soon as one thinks that they have found that trick, they have then stepped out of an authentic spiritual meditation. Instead one needs to enter every prayer for one's entire life always in the mindset of a beginner who knows nothing on his own and is totally dependent on God.

However, a soul that continues in his pursuit of loving God through prayer will begin to discern signs of a healthy spiritual life. Contemplation and meditation can never be selfish and it must be founded on complete love of oneself, of the world, and of God. First of all, we must completely embrace God's will for us in our life, including accepting ourselves and loving ourselves exactly as God has made us. Secondly, we must embrace a radical love of the world in our prayer. Prayer is not escapism from the problems of the world but an entering into these problems at a deeper level. Finally, prayer is an eternal quest to love God just as he leads us to love him.

This love of God must be authentic. Merton describes it as love, "by purity of heart and [with] tears of compunction." (56) Honest prayer will lead to the de-masking of ourselves. As Merton says, "Finding our heart and recovering this awareness of our inmost identity implies the recognition that our external, everyday self is to a great extent a mask and a fabrication." (87) When we come to this understanding we can begin to shed these masks that prayer will bring to light. In time, we will begin to sense who we truly are and how God truly sees us. This nakedness and defenseless vulnerability is the childlikeness that God praises in the Gospel. When we come to prayer with such innocence and purity of heart we are inclined to be freed from our false attachments and open to a radical trust in God.

We also must understand that these gifts of a spiritual life are never permanent. Just as the manna in the desert lasted but a day, the gifts of prayer are gifts for the moment and can be easily lost if taken for granted. We must always enter into prayer as desperate beggars with an eternal and daily need of God's grace, mercy, and faith.

Authentic prayer is pure love and pure freedom. It is a preference to always walk into the desert of emptiness and poverty, with complete trust that God will provide what is needed. True meditation is not a seeking to know about God from a theological perspective, but a desire to grow in an understanding of how God loves us. The moment we try to grasp onto God and to quantify his nature with our reason, we leave contemplation. Contemplation is entering into a mystery that is beyond us and that we can only know that we hunger for.

This mystery is marked at times by paradoxes. St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:6-10, “We have to be pure-minded, enlightened, forgiving, and gracious to others; we have to rely on the Holy Spirit, on unaffected love, on the truth of our message, on the power of God. To the right and left we must be armed with innocence, now honored, now slighted, now traduced, and now flattered. They call us deceivers and we tell the truth; unknown and we are freely acknowledged; dying men, and see we live; punished, yes, but not doomed to die; sad men that rejoice continually; beggars that bring riches to many; disinherited, and the world is ours.” Hence a deep spirituality with deep prayer will embrace the freedom of St. Paul’s paradoxical and yet so wonderfully true description of Christ’s disciples.

One of these paradoxes is the unity of contemplation and action. Merton says that contemplation should be always preferred and desired over action. However, he concedes that action is necessary to be truly Christian. Therefore, he says that a Christian should seek to combine the virtues of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. These virtues of penitence in Lazarus, action in Martha, and contemplation in Mary lead to an authentic Christian. However, Merton cautions when he says, “There is no contradiction between action and contemplation when Christian apostolic activity is raised to the level of pure charity.... But the trouble is that if prayer is not itself deep, powerful, and pure and filled at all times with the spirit of contemplation, Christian action can never really reach this high level.

This is the challenge that Christians are daily called to: to remain contemplative in a society of countless distractions. However, this challenge is the path to a deeper holiness. It is a path of insecurity where our own strength is of little value. Hence, we are called to daily put on the armor of Christ and to trust completely in His divine assistance on our every step of the journey.

Chapter 13 discusses the unitive stage of the spiritual life. This stage is marked by a deeper union with Christ with the paradox of a jarring feeling of disunion. The soul is robbed of spiritual fruit and comfort, and is asked to remain faithful to God without consolation. It is a period of abandonment of our

faculties of reason, emotions, thinking, and even faith. All that supported and built our faith is seemingly taken away. The Christian who God endows with the grace to walk this road is purified to such a state that they can seek God with nothing but hope.

St Gregory the Great leaves the reader with an excellent definition of the contemplative life in the following statement. “The contemplative life is to retain with all one’s mind the love of God and neighbor but to rest from exterior motion and cleave only to the desire of the Maker, that the mind may now take no pleasure in doing anything, but having spurned all cares may be aglow to see the face of its Creator: so that it already knows how to bear with sorrow the burden of the corruptible flesh and with all its desires to seek to join the hymn-singing choirs of angels, to mingle with the heavenly citizens and to rejoice at its everlasting incorruption in the sight of God.” (62)

Also St. Gregory of Nyssa provides this excellent quote in his definition of the mystical night. “Night designates the contemplation of invisible things after the manner of Moses who entered into the darkness where God was, this God who makes of darkness his hiding place. Surrounded by the divine night the soul seeks him who is hidden in darkness. She possesses indeed the love of him whom she seeks, but the Beloved escapes the grasp of her thoughts....Therefore abandoning the search she recognizes him whom she desires by the very fact that his knowledge is beyond understanding. Thus she says, ‘having left behind all created things and abandoned the aid of the understanding, by faith alone I have found my Beloved. And I will not let him go holding him with the grip of faith, until he enters into my bedchamber.’ The chamber is the heart which is capable of the indwelling when it is restored to its primitive state.” (101)

Hence Merton, supported by the many father’s of the faith, explains that contemplative prayer is a journey of the soul to God. It is marked by signposts that a soul receptive to the Holy Spirit will be able to identify. However, contemplation in the end comes down to a gift given by God. It is something that we can only prepare our souls to achieve by cultivating the Christian virtues. However, we can never obtain the gift through our own effort because the gift of contemplation is God himself and our finite human condition can never grasp His infinite reality. We must just open our hearts and souls to daily seeking and loving him, and continually beg for an ever increasing union with him.

Merton, Thomas. *Contemplative Prayer*. New York, New York: Herder and Herder, 1969.

While meditating on the ‘Stations of the Cross’, I noticed such a marked similarity of the stations to our walk on the spiritual journey.

Purgative

Station 1: Jesus is condemned to death

- We enter into the Christian way by being condemned with scorn and ridicule by the world.

Station 2: Jesus embraces his cross.

- We embrace our cross with the zeal of new disciples. The tough road seems so full of optimism.

Station 3: Jesus falls the first time.

- Our first set back of sin or apostolic failure. Forces us to trust in God. The end of the purgative stage.

Illuminative

Station 4-6: Mother Mary, Simon of Cyrene, and Veronica comfort Jesus

- We are given encouragement by the body of Christ to continue our journey despite our fall.

Station 7: Christ falls again

- We are asked to get up after having been given the consolations of the above 3 graces.
- Illuminative stage.

Unitive

Station 8: Christ meets the women of Jerusalem

- We are asked to love despite our fall and weakness. Unitive stage.
- This is the stage Mother Teresa walked for 50 years of darkness.

Station 9: Christ falls a 3rd time.

- We are asked to continue on despite our 3rd fall and apostolic failure amidst jeering and ridicule.

Station 10: Christ is stripped of his clothing.

- We are denuded and exposed vulnerable to the world. Our ‘images’ of ourselves are discarded through self reflection and prayer. We are confident to expose ourselves to the world with all of our weaknesses because we trust in God.

Station 11: Christ is nailed to the cross

- Not only are we robbed of dignity but our physical mobility is now taken away. We are nailed to the cross that we embraced in Station 2. We are united to God’s will.

Station 12: Christ dies on the cross

- We die into God’s love. Utterly abandoned by the world.

Station 13: Christ is taken down from the cross

- We are embraced by God and totally in union with him. The world mourns our loss and goes through its own purgation of suffering as they wonder what will happen next.

Station 14: Christ is buried.

- We are buried with Christ and partake in his judgment, hopefully to rise with him again and to become fully in union with him in heaven for all eternity